

SOMEBODY

LOVES

YOU

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*For my mother*



*I look for myself and am not to be found. I am  
of all chrysanthemum hours, bright above tall  
vases. I have to make of my soul an ornamental  
thing.*

—FERNANDO PESSOA,  
*The Book of Disquiet*



## EGGS

A man is offering her a bowl. She peers inside and there is an egg nestled in light peat close to the surface. It is a small blue egg – perfect and complete. She gently lifts it out of the bowl and places it in her mouth and the egg, still warm, breaks onto her tongue, makes her retch a little but still she swallows it. She closes then reopens her eyes and a blue bird escapes from her mouth. Then another and another, until the room is filled with their iridescent turquoise feathers and clamour of yellow-black beaks.

A few settle on her head, others perch on her shoulders, but then after a few minutes and for no discernible reason they quickly flit back inside – a hymn of bodies returning as they enter back through her parted lips. Several fly into and penetrate her torso. When the last bird has gone, she closes her mouth and leaves the room.

## FOXES

The day my sister tried to drag the baby fox into our house was the same day my mother had her first mental breakdown.

In many ways it was the perfect morning for a breakdown. The rain was spitting softy, the Parkers' dog just wouldn't stop barking, it went on emitting that terrible noise like it was a machine loaded with everlasting batteries. In the living room I had just finished watching a long documentary about wild kangaroos.

Upstairs there was a doctor, the Aunties, and my father of course. There was a toy: a miniature replica camera that my sister was jealous of, and she kept prising the camera from my fingers and pointing it at things she liked the look of and saying, 'See I can click! I can click!' till eventually I had to steal it away from her and hang the long leather strap around my neck. For days we had known about the foxes. They had come closer and closer to the house and had been chewing at the garden boots my mum had stored under the corrugated plastic shelter.

I went into the kitchen and the side door was open, and there was Rania crouching on the steps carrying a bundle, a blanket covering the body so that only its ears and eyes were visible.

I heard the front door click open then slam shut, the fox yelped and slipped away, and we didn't see my mother again for three whole months.

## MARROW

Since infancy my sister has been stimulated by gore, guts and blood. My parents said that when she was still in her buggy, she would sniff the air, aroused by the smell of the butcher's, then unbuckle her harness and head to the spectacle of the shop window. She would be at the front of the circle, pushing forward, wanting but also *needing* to see.

For some time, my sister's most frequent questions were, 'Could you see the bone?' and, 'How much blood?'

Rania befriended Martin Higgins at school who was prone to long nosebleeds. She was always coming to his aid when he was bleeding across the school field during sports lessons, or after too much sunshine, which disturbed the delicate blood vessels in this pale and nervous boy's nostrils. Whilst the teacher struggled to stem the flow with cigar-shaped cotton rolls Rania would be by her side, holding napkins and asking, 'How many pints do you think he's leaked? When will he start clotting? Will he pass out? How long will he keep bleeding for?' (Usually about an hour and a half.) For some time, my parents harboured a belief that their eldest daughter might train as a doctor or a surgeon. It was a short-lived fantasy, as it quickly became apparent Rania wasn't the slightest bit interested in healing anything, she was just morbidly

inquisitive. My parents checked their ambitions and downgraded their hopes to dentistry, followed by pharmacology, then podiatry, until, a little while later, they abandoned all hope of the sciences.

## BEGINNINGS

My name is Ruby. I am skinny and superfluously tall. I am skinny because I have inherited both my parents' propensity for growing thin bones. If you met him probably you would think my father is short – he tells us he is not unusually so for an Indian man, but by European standards he is willing to concede. When my family says that I am too tall I assume they mean both in the western and Indian sense. I suppose I should say at this stage that both my parents are normalish talkers – let's get that out of the way straight off. I'm not much of a talker by whatever standards you choose to apply.

The first time I spoke out loud at school I said the word *sister* and tripped all over it. I tried a second time, and my tongue got caught on the middle-syllable hiss and hovered there. The third time? A teacher asked me a question, and I opened my mouth as a sort of formality but closed it softly, knowing with perfect certainty that nothing would ever come out again. I was certain about this the next morning and even more certain about it the day following that. I uttered absolutely nothing. It became the most certain thing in my life.

I was tested for aural dysfunction, mumps and general stupidity. For a few months I was even sent up to a clinic to sit in a room with a young doctor. She passed me a cup of broken

crayons and some coloured paper to draw whatever my mind rested on. I think I knew at an early age that this doctor's job was to gently fish inside my head, to get right to the bottom of my talking problems. Because I was a pleaser, I tried very hard with my crayon drawings, and it seemed important to be especially curious about whether the little dolls she placed in my lap were wearing knickers. In those sessions I drew as if my life depended on it. I drew forests seething with all manner of creatures and I made up a complicated bubble-family of rainbow-filled characters. I drew wild deserts and used up all the precious gold crayons for sand dunes, and wasted all the browns on engorged cacti, which seemed to irritate the doctor at the end of our first session.

'Ruby, what if another little girl or boy wanted the gold crayons for their special drawing and they were all used up? Just think how very sad they might feel.'

And the way she looked at me at that moment made me feel more wretched and ashamed than anything else up to this point in my life, even more ashamed than that time I ended up peeing on Mrs Henderson's yellow welcome mat in Reception because I couldn't unstrap my dungarees in time. At the end of the sessions at the clinic I would place my array of paintings on the floor for inspection and the doctor would stand up quickly, peer over my shoulder, turn her head this way and that, weighing up, and then select a few to take away with her. Once, she tilted her head to the side for a long while whilst I waited in the silence, and she took nothing at all. I was free to go home with the pile of rejected papers, which now disgusted me just as much as the dirty gum-flecked carpet they rested on.

Soon afterwards I began having night terrors accompanied by wetting my bed, though I had apparently been a dry girl from an early age. My parents got scared and withdrew me from the sessions. My symptoms quickly disappeared, to their great relief: it was bad enough that their daughter was a dumb mute; a deranged, incontinent mute would have been a step too far.